



HOLY CROSS TRACTS

Number 3



Holy Water

THE use of Holy Water is one of the many customs that have come down to us from the primitive Church. Just when its use first arose is not known. It seems, however, to have become well established before the great Nicæan Church Council of the year 325, for at about that time we find in the Church code known as the "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles" a formal prayer authorized for the blessing of either water or oil. Our knowledge of the methods of the early Church in setting forth forms of prayer, makes it practically certain that the use of Holy Water was common long before the Church approved a form for blessing it. It is interesting thus to see that the same age that gave us the original form of our Nicene creed gave us also the authorized use of Holy Water.

Holy Water is a simple mixture of water with a little salt, the former being the symbol of cleansing, and the latter, from its preservative properties, symbolizing perseverance in holiness.

In the service for blessing water the early Church prayed that the water be endued with

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“a power to restore health, to drive away diseases, to banish demons, and to disperse all snares, through Christ our hope.”

The form of blessings used in our time is in its essence, the same as that which was set forth by the Church sixteen hundred years ago. It consists of five prayers, two for blessing the salt, two for the water, and a fifth for blessing the mixture. The final prayer is as follows, and is one of the most beautiful in all the Church's ritual:

“O God, Who art the Author of unconquered might, the King of the empire that cannot be overthrown, the ever-glorious Conqueror: Who dost keep under the strength of the dominion that is against Thee; Who rulest the raging of the fierce enemy; Who dost mightily fight against the wickedness of Thy foes; with fear and trembling we entreat Thee, O Lord, and we beseech Thee graciously to behold this creature of salt and water. Mercifully shine upon it, hallow it with the dew of Thy loving kindness: that wheresoever it shall be sprinkled with invocation of Thy Holy Name, all haunting of the unclean spirit may be driven away; far thence let the fear of the venomous serpent be cast; and wheresoever it shall be, there let the Presence of the Holy Ghost be vouchsafed to all of us who shall ask for Thy mercy.”

This prayer constitutes the blessing of the Water, and the whole act and all that results from it, is pre-eminently evangelical from every point of view. The blessing simply asks of God that the power of Satan may be cast out from where-soever this water may be kept or sprinkled, and that the reign of the Holy Ghost may be there set up.

The prayer is potential; its power becomes

actual the moment the Water is “sprinkled with the invocation of Thy Holy Name.” Hence it is used with some set form of invocation of God; this form is sometimes a prayer of some length, as, for example, the one used for blessing the growing crops on the Rogation Days; but more commonly, it is the simple form: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

At the dedication of the first temple King Solomon's prayer of consecration consisted almost entirely of petitions the efficacy of which depended on this, that the people of Israel should look toward that material structure of wood and stone, or at least towards its site, when they prayed (I Kings 8). It was for the purpose of applying these prayers to his own case that Daniel when in captivity prayed “his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem” (Dan. 6:10).

The Church has adopted the same principle in her Prayer Book service for the Consecration of Churches. Special blessings are asked upon all persons who might be baptized, confirmed, communicated, married or make their Confessions, in the particular building.

The benefits to be derived from the use of Holy Water are analogous to these. It is a simple outward devotion in which God uses material means to convey His blessing. This same principle holds good in regard to the Rosary, the Crucifix, and other objects which have been blessed with prayer.

We will conclude with a few words regarding the actual use of Holy Water. One enters a church to pray; he dips his fingers in a font near the door and with the Water makes the Sign of the Cross, pronouncing secretly as he does so, the invocation, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen," or some like calling upon the name of God. According to a popular expression he "blesses himself," and this common saying is precisely true; for by this act he appropriates to himself the blessing invoked upon those who thus use this Water; just as Daniel by praying with his windows opened towards Jerusalem received a special blessing in answer to the prayer made by King Solomon five hundred years before.

Many persons use Holy Water in their private devotions with the same end in view, keeping it for this purpose in their rooms. The private use of Holy Water was common in certain parts of the Church as early as about the year 500.

Small Holy Water stoups made for private use can be bought at slight cost, and surely the blessing which will come from such a pious practice is worth the slight trouble involved in securing it.

SP 10M 3-50

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